



ANDREW ON WEDNESDAY

Doing an Iceland

At the moment we are enjoying the Winter Olympics, this time round being hosted in Pyeongchang by South Korea. Very soon, most of us will be following with intent, probably one of the greatest sports events that is organised in the World, the FIFA World Cup Tournament.

With a daughter like mine who is passionate about 'sports', this topic is always at the top of the agenda during dinner! One of the issues that keeps coming up is that of trying to analyse why we, as a country, never manage to make the grade on the global scene. Yes, we've had a couple of athletes, very few, that may have excelled to some degree but if we are fair to ourselves, we know that this is way distant from any decorous impact.

Now the arguments keep revolving around the same issues, that is to say, that we are a small country, with limited resources dedicated to sports. Now, whilst I think that these reasons are legitimate I still believe that we can overcome these obstacles if we really wanted to assuming we really believe that sports is an essential component of our social fabric (which I'm not sure we do).

The argument that we are small in size and population does not seem to hold any water to me, it is simply an excuse. Naturally, I wouldn't think that we can be in a position to have a bearing on every sports discipline practiced in the World but I think we can see better results in a number of disciplines. Look at Iceland with a population of around 335,000 people. They are a small country, no? But with grit and resolve they have managed to break 'this glass ceiling'.

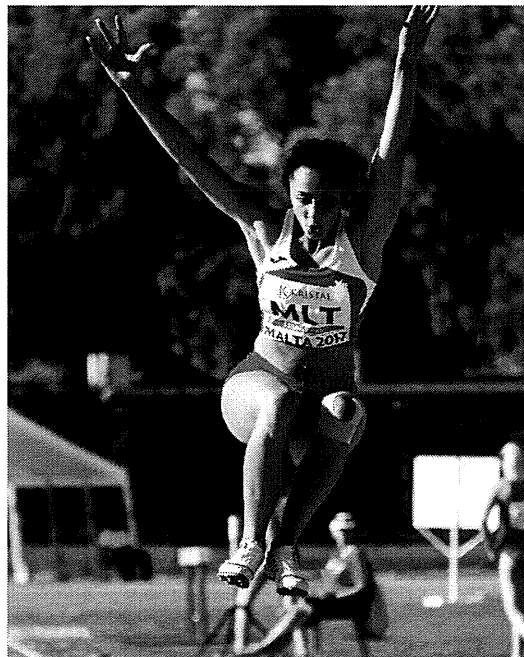
Some pointers:

Now that we have a sports school we need to be au fait with what are the objectives of this school especially when identifying elite athletes and preparing children/adolescents to start competing at an elite level.

Another issue that comes to mind is the scouting process. I don't feel we have developed this 'profession' well-enough.

An added dimension to the 'world of sports' is the administrative infrastructure, human and physical. We not only lack office space for organisations to operate but also capacity building and staff training. We need to train administrators that can conceptualise the specific needs of sports.

The excellent work that the Institute for Physical Education & Sport (declaring my bias - my daughter is reading a BSc with this Institute) at the University of Malta needs to be complemented with research funds, more staffing resources and suitable sport facilities (I've been told that there is a mega-project



Athlete Claire Azzopardi

Photo: Wally Galea

in the making).

We need to have a sports strategy that gives direction to where we need to go. Some years ago Pippo Psaila did a massive exercise of what was then going to be a Sports Strategy. We just cannot keep talking about sports 'as fun' and just have associations grinning because they are provided with land where to practice their sports (appeasement at its best). If we are giving resources, we need to ensure that associations have clear objectives and sound deliverables.

Sports journalism is also another important element. The more time passes the less resources are being dedicated for sports journalism. Sports journalism is not just about reporting and listing out results at the end of the news bulletin but about investigating the sports world, deals that are taking place (especially during the transfer market), alleged corruption, and other issues that are in the public interest. Sports Journalism is the moral arm of this sector.

The role of the State also needs to be defined. For example, football is well catered for because of our affiliation with UEFA and FIFA. These associations are providing us with endless resources that make football

sustainable even though a crowd could mean anything between 200 to 800 supporters (for the 'well attended' Premier league games)! There are endless resources being syphoned into that discipline. Money, land, sponsorship, television coverage and yet we keep tossing money into this sports that is leading us to get one drubbing after another when facing stiff competition (and as a consequence being permanently placed at the end of the league table in every international competition we get involved in, 'basta nighabu taj-jeb').

Are the Government sponsored schemes leaving the desired impact? Are we really investing in the right athletes or are the criteria still rather dicey?

Are we developing professionals who are by today's standards a requirement; sports doctors, physiotherapists specialised in sports, nutritionists, sports psychologists, surgeons and the rest?

Apart from the excellent programmes that Sport Malta is organising are we supporting other private run schools to ensure that the networking leads to the identification of the best athletes.

What is the impact that betting (and the betting industry) having on our sports culture?

When it comes to resource allocation someone needs to prioritise. If gymnastics, athletics, women's basketball are areas (for example) that are rendering results then let's focus for the next 10 years on these disciplines. At one point for example Judo and to a certain extent Shooting have brought credible results. But we cannot base our investment on one or two athletes, without a plan, schedule or project. We need to dig in our heels and put our money where our mouth is.

Every game needs good referees, judges, umpires - people who decide and make sure that the rules are being safeguarded. Not much to say about this. Amateurism at its best in certain situations, except for the odd exception.

Corruption? Let's nip it in the bud. We need to come down like a ton of bricks and not excuse that behaviour (as I heard some journalists doing).

Coaches are another loop in this debate. In certain disciplines like football and basketball we now have coaches that are attaining decent levels, some even going as far as paying for their courses (some or many of which need to be done abroad) from their own pockets.

I go to watch my daughter doing athletics and used to go and watch my son when he played basketball. You see the 'miracles' that these associations are doing with the limited resources they have. A handful of dedicated men and women scrambling around trying to make ends meet and dish out money themselves. Some double up (or triple up!) as association officials, judges and coaches all at once. This can't be a model that can leave an impact on the sector, except for a negative one because we are stretching everyone too thinly.

And parent education? Let's not go there!!

As a small country we always hope and wish that we might qualify for one of the large tournaments but I feel we lack ambition and spirit. Our post-colonial attitude, myopic vision and low confidence make us accept that we are small and so we are weak. It might be true that we have insufficient expertise and professionalism - but this doesn't have to remain that way. That we are a small Country we cannot do much about, but that we dedicate more resources, have a plan and a vision, that yes we can do.

So whilst I think that it's all uphill, I believe that we can do 'an Iceland'.

Ghandi xi Nghid

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